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The Renaming of Kin

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The Renaming of Kin

It was a few months after her stroke
when she first mistook me for Jesus Christ.
She lived on the bottom floor of our house.
I remember in between
the death of my grandfather and her first stroke
"Heartbreak Hotel" and the vacuum cleaner
competing for equal time,
straining against the floor boards beneath my bed.
She and Elvis were the rising of the sun.
The summer after my grandfather died
she went on vacation with us.
Our annual trip to Hatteras Island got set aside
for Graceland and Tupelo, Mississippi,
I had never seen so many men
hair slicked back, bottom lip stuck out,
white satin pants with fringe up and down the sides.
It was the first I had ever seen
my grandmother in a t-shirt--
a picture of Elvis on the front
and the lyrics to "Love Me Tender" on the back.
She wore it for four days.

It was after the month-long hospital stay
after she resettled, speechless, into her apartment,
I would spend hours writing and pronouncing,
slowly, words: chair, sofa, fork
And her name: Editha
so she could trace each letter.
She would come to the bottom of the stairs
that led to our kitchen
We could hear her shuffle into the hallway
take deep breaths and try to utter a familiar name.
She would call, "God" "Mama" "Helen."
One word each time, several times a day.
Once she came up
her hands held out to me--
wood glue had been mistaken for hand cream
and I peeled and soaked each arthritic finger.

It had been nearing the end of a long day
when she called for me.
My mother and father, drained, sat
at the kitchen table, trying to hold
their eye lids open, content
with the fact my mother
had finally persuaded her into bed.
Then, the familiar shuffle, sighs,
"Jesus"
My mother lifted her head and looked at me,
her eyes were heavy,
"That must be you."

-Editha Ann Wilberton